

Preface

She could hear the footsteps behind her as she ran down the alley. She was afraid to look back; afraid he was getting closer. She slid on the wet pavement, but never let up. She jumped up and continued running. Her shoes making what to her sounded like loud clomping on the ground. Her breathing was labored. She could feel sweat running down her forehead, feel it burning her eyes.

“Sofia,” he cried from the distance. “You know you can’t hide from me.”

She didn’t slow down. She could see a streetlight in the distance in front of her. She picked up her pace, hoping she could get around people before he reached her. Just as she turned the corner to a well-lit parking lot, someone grabbed her from behind and covered her mouth to stifle her scream.

“Shh,” the soft voice said. “He’ll hear you.”

CHAPTER 1

Three months earlier

As Sofia rode in the cab to her new house ‘Melvin’s Grove’ she got a strange feeling. Looking out the window didn’t reveal anything special; trees, a lake, horse riding trails. The same stuff she had seen when her and her brother would visit as children.

The last time she had been here, she was barely thirteen. She remembered the day her parents said she and her brother wouldn’t be visiting again.

Five years ago...

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“Why can’t we go back?” Brice whined.

“All you need to know is it’s not safe there anymore.” Amanda Moran told her youngest child. “There are things you wouldn’t understand. I know you’re angry right now, but you’ll see, it’s for the best.”

Brice mumbled to himself as he stomped off to his room.

“I’m sorry mom. It’s not fair that Brice has to suffer because of me.”

Kirk Moran spoke up, “Sofia, you have nothing to feel guilty for. Brice will be fine in time. He’s only ten; they bounce back quickly at that age.”

Amanda and Kirk Moran were dedicated loving parents. Their children never wanted for anything, but they were not rich. Though Kirk had come from a wealthy background, no one would ever know that by the way he acted.

Kirk was a tall blonde haired good-looking man. His high school sweetheart, and current wife, was almost a foot shorter, with brown hair. The only thing they had in common was their eyes; they were both blue.

Then they were both gone as if they were never here.

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Now here they were, going back to the last place Sofia wanted to be. If it wasn't for the fact these people were their only living relatives, Sofia and Brice would not be heading there. Even if it was only for three months, until Sofia turned eighteen. Then she'll be Brice's guardian, and he'll never know the truth about this horrible place.

"I can't believe it, Sof. Nothing's changed in five years."

Brice was looking out the opposite window except his eyes were filled with awe. His sister's eyes were filled with fear.

Sofia watched the cab drive away as she stood on the magnificent porch that would be their home for the next few months. She hadn't told Brice they wouldn't be staying long; she just hoped he would understand when they left that it was for the best.

Sure, he had been a kid when mom and dad had told him they would no longer spend their summers here riding horses and camping out by the lake. He pouted for a few weeks, but once school started back, he didn't mention 'The Grove' again. The next summer, instead of The Grove, they sent him to a survival camp. They had smores and swimming lessons, but that was as tough as it got. When he turned thirteen, he said he was too old to go anymore and wanted to stay home and hang with his friends.

Two weeks before school ended, Amanda and Kirkman Moran were killed; shot to death in their beds by, as of yet, and unknown assailant.

Sofia saw a note taped to the door, as she got closer. It just said 'be back soon. Make yourself at home. Pick any room you want in the north wing and unpack. I will see you both at dinner, Love Aunt Esther.

Brice turned the doorknob and the large wooden door creaked open.

“Well I guess we’re home now Sissy.” Brice said.

“Yea, home sweet hell.” She replied.

Brice laughed at her comment but grabbed his bag and headed inside. She followed and they went up the stairs to the north wing. Sofia stopped in front of the first door and opened it.

“I’ll take this one,” she said as she looked around the room.

“I’m gonna take the last one down the hall,” Brice told her. “I like my privacy and it looks quiet.”

Sofia waved as he walked down the hall.

Brice looked around the large old room as he opened the door. It seemed cold and lonely. He dropped his suitcase on the floor and sat down on the bed. It had been a long time since he had seen this house. He couldn’t recall ever being in this particular room, but really, they all look the same; dark walls, wooden desk, and green bedding.

Brice remembered coming here when he was very young. He loved to ride horses and swim in the lake. The last summer he was here had ended early. They still had almost a month before school started but mom and dad showed up late one night and brought them both home. He had been in bed asleep and rode home in his pajamas; all the while asking why they had to leave. No one ever gave him an answer and he finally stopped asking.

Sofia was taken to the hospital and stayed a few days then spent the rest of that summer almost entirely in her room. He always suspected that her injury was the reason they didn’t go back, but when his parents sent him to survival camp alone the next year, he knew he would never see The Grove again.

Now he’s back and can’t wait to have fun. Even his sister couldn’t ruin it for him. The only thing that keeps him from being happy is that his mom and dad had to die for him to come back to the place he loved.

Sofia was hanging her clothes up in the enormous walk in closet when she heard the voices. She froze in place and strained her ears to listen. Trying to figure out which way the voices were coming.

As she stood in the doorway of the closet, Sofia realized there was nobody talking it was singing she heard. It was coming from the vent in the back of the closet. "A strange place for a vent," she thought as she walked quietly toward it.

She remembered when she was young that she could hear people talking through the vents if she listened real close. When she tried to tell her parents about it, they said it was her imagination. As she got older, she was glad no one believed her. She heard many secrets about the people that lived in the house.

Sometimes she heard things she wished she had never heard.

When Sofia was thirteen, there were lots people living in Melvin's Grove. Several staff members and the old couple who owned the place, as well as their son. They were her and Brice's great aunt and uncle. Melvin and Esther Moran were their dad's aunt and uncle.

Uncle Melvin had died a few years after the night Sofia's parents took them from the house. Aunt Esther and her maid and nurse are the only ones that still live here full time, but a cook and driver come every day. Sean Moran, Melvin and Esther's only living child, hadn't been seen in years.

When their mom and dad died, Aunt Esther said they could come live with her. She still has her mind but her body is weak. She said she would hire a nanny but the children said they didn't need one. The maid agreed to help with the kids and the judge finally agreed. Nobody asked Brice or Sofia if they even wanted to move here.

Down the hall, Brice was blasting his radio and jumping on the bed in rhythm to the music.

"What do you think you're doing?" Sofia yelled over the noise.

Letting his legs fold under him, Brice smiled at his sister. "I'm just trying to have fun sissy. It's boring here."

"Try putting your clothes away. That should take you ten minutes. Then go outside and yell. I can hear your music in my room."

"Fine, I'll be quieter but I'm not putting my clothes away. It's not like we'll be here long anyway."

Sofia's mouth dropped. She hadn't told Brice they were only staying until she turned eighteen.

"Don't look so shocked. I'm not stupid. I know you hate this place so I figured you would leave as soon as you can. I wish I could say I'm not going with you but Aunt Esther is old and she might not live much longer. When that happens I'll have to live with you until I'm eighteen. Which actually sucks since I don't know why you can't just stay here? This place is so huge you can hide from everyone."

Brice went back to jumping on the bed as Sofia left his room. "Not everyone" she thought.

Dinner was served at six every night. Sofia remembered that from her summers here. At fifteen till six, she went to get Brice so they could go down to dinner.

He was standing in the middle of a pile of clothes looking confused. He looked up when she walked in the room. "I don't know what to wear. Do I dress up, or just wear what I usually do?"

"You can wear anything you want. Don't change who you are to appease anyone else Brice," his sister told him.

"Your right sissy," he said and jumped down off the clothes. "I'm gonna stay in this." He held his hands out to show his everyday jeans and a black tee shirt.

Even Sofia had to admit her brother was good looking. Tall for his age, he was 5'10 and 180lbs of muscle from football and wrestling in school. He had dad's blonde hair and blue eyes. He looked older than he was too. At fifteen, he could easily pass for eighteen. He had driven around the old neighborhood since he turned fifteen eight months ago. That's also when he started to fill out everywhere else.

Their birthdays were less than a month apart. Sofia's was a few weeks before Brice's and they were both in July.

Sofia just hoped she could make it until her birthday this year.

As they sat down for dinner Brice noticed how Sofia seemed to tense up the minute they entered the room. Her face was white and her fists were clenched. She stopped just inside the doorway. Brice took her arm and led her to the closest chair. She sat down slowly and Brice took the chair next to her. He and his sister had fought each other for years but he still felt it was his job to protect her. Seeing as how he had grown taller and bigger than she had this past year, he believed it even more.

"Sissy, are you ok?" he whispered to her.

"Um, yea," she stuttered, "I'm fine."

Somehow, he knew she wasn't fine but didn't press the issue. She would tell him when she was ready.

Aunt Esther was wheeled in by her nurse to the head of the table. Her hair was short and completely grey, but her blue eyes still had life in them. Her frail looking body couldn't be more than 100lbs but her smile was bright. The kids sat quietly waiting to see what was expected of them.

"How lovely to see you both again," she said. "It's been too long. The pictures your father sent don't do either of you justice."

Sofia and Brice looked at each other. They didn't know their dad had sent pictures.

Aunt Esther patted the nurse's arm, "this is Rita. She is my full time nurse and is here most of the time." Rita was a short plump woman. Her hair was auburn and her skin the color of chocolate. "She has been my friend for over ten years now. When I became so ill I couldn't be alone, she offered to come stay here so I wouldn't have to go into a nursing home. I don't know what I would do without her."

Just then, a woman carrying a large tray entered the room. She placed it in the center of the table.

"This is the cook, Carrie. She will be here Monday to Friday to cook all the meals. Rita cooks on the weekends." She smiled at the cook and nodded her head.

Carrie smiled back then looked at the kids, "it's nice to finally meet you. Esther talks about you all the time. If there is anything special you kids like, just let me know and I'll work it into the menu."

With that, she left the room in a hurry.

"So how was your trip?" Rita asked.

Sofia answered her, "It was fine, thank you."

Dinner was tense and mostly quiet. Rita tried to make small talk, and she smiled at the kids but it didn't help much. It was very awkward and sad sitting in that big dining room with only four people.

Brice noticed his sister kept looking at the kitchen door. She barely spoke and hardly ate. Something was going on with her but he didn't know what. Of course, Sofia had always been a little odd.

She only had one friend in school and never dated. It wasn't because she wasn't asked either. He guessed she was pretty to other boys. 5'3 and 110lbs she wasn't fat. Long light brown hair and blue eyes. She was also very smart. Most of Brice's friends had a crush on Sofia but he told all of them she was off

limits. She kept to herself a lot and didn't even hang out at the mall like most girls her age.

Brice didn't think it was a big deal until a year ago when he started noticing girls. That's when he realized Sofia had never had a boyfriend, or even a date. Not that it was a bad thing, but it was weird.

After dinner, they walked back up to their rooms. Sofia went into hers and shut the door before Brice could ask her about her behavior. As he walked away, he heard the door lock. Funny, Sofia never locked her door at home.

As she walked over to the bed, Sofia tried to keep her composure. She knew that Brice had noticed her strange behavior. She just hoped he didn't ask about it. Sofia was adamant years ago, that Brice never know about her shame. He would never forgive her.

Her cell phone rang making her jump. Brice was on the caller ID. "Hello, Brice."

"Hey, I was hoping you would go for a nighttime ride with me. It's supposed to be warm tonight and we can hang out a while."

Sofia new that horses were Brice's favorite animal. We didn't have room at home for any, but they had leased some land a long time ago and had two horses on it. When we knew we were moving here, Brice had the horses moved here too. They had been here a week already and Brice missed Flame. He rode him all the time. He had even been known to ride the horse to the store for a coke. In our small town, nobody cared if there was a horse tied to the bicycle bar.

"Ok Brice. Can you saddle Mabel for me while I change?"

"Sure Sof, I'll meet you at the stable." Brice hung up but sounded excited.

By the time she reached the stable, Brice had both horses ready to go. He was holding the reins of Mabel, while sitting on Flame.

Sofia jumped up and they set off on a trail. She followed Brice's lead. He seemed to remember every trail in the woods. By eight that night, they were sitting by the lake. Brice was starting a fire while Sofia was taking the saddles off the horses. She tied them to separate trees and went to look for firewood to add to the small fire Brice had going.

They soon had a blaze going. Then they sat watching the lake ripple.

"So, you gonna tell me what's going on with you sissy?" Brice finally said.

"What do you mean Bri?" she tried to look innocent.

"You know what I mean. You didn't talk the whole ride up here. I had to take you to the table in the dining room, and you stared at the kitchen door during supper. Then you locked your door when you went in after shutting it in my face. I can tell your upset Sof and it's not about mom and dad. So are you gonna tell me or do I have to guess?"

Sofia didn't know what to say. Brice seemed to see more than she thought. She didn't want him to know her secret, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"You don't want to know Bri. It's not a happy story and you wouldn't understand anyway. Just drop it and pretend we never had this conversation." She didn't really think that would work but she gave it a shot.

"Are you kidding me sissy? You think I could just pretend you blew me off. I'm not a kid anymore. Mom told me the same thing when I asked why we didn't come here anymore. I wouldn't understand she said. But I'm almost sixteen, and I'm mature for my age and you know it. Just tell me already."

"I don't want to tell you ok. It's not your business." Sofia was getting mad but Brice was persistent.

He got up and stomped around. "Look Sofia," he only called her that when he was mad, "I know something's up. Every since we got here you've looked like you've seen a ghost. You're pale and quiet. Not your usual quiet either,

cemetery quiet. I'm not a kid and if whatever it is affects you then it affects me too. That's the way it is. You are the only thing I have left. Aunt Esther is only family by default. Blood does not make us family it just makes us related. Just please trust me."

By the time he finished his rant, Sofia was crying. When he realized what he had done, he immediately went over and put his arm around her. "I'm sorry sissy. I didn't mean to yell at you. I just need to know what's wrong so I can fix it."

She pulled away, "you can't fix it Brice. Nobody can fix it. Please, let it go."

He pulled her close again, "I know you think I'm just a kid, but really, I can help. No matter what it is, I can help."

This time she didn't pull away but she tensed up. Somehow, she knew she couldn't keep this a secret forever. "Ok Bri. But if you want to know everything, you have to listen. Do you have the time to listen?" Sofia said sadly. "You can't interrupt or yell, just hear me out and please don't be mad at me."

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because I'm nasty, and dirty, and I don't want you to think badly of me when you know the truth."

"Sofia, I don't know what you're talking about. You could never do anything to make me believe you're that bad. Just tell me. I promise not to judge you in any way."

So she began the tale she had tried to hide from her brother for five years. The story she swore she would never tell again.

"I know you remember the last time we were here. You were ten and I had just turned thirteen. Mom and dad picked us up in the middle of the night and I spent almost a week in the hospital." Brice nodded his head, "that's where this started. It was that summer."

“I know mom told you I was hurt and had to see the doctor. I also know she never told you how I got hurt. Did she?”

“No. Mom just said you had to stay in the hospital a few days but you would be ok. I was asleep when they came and got us so I didn’t ask how you were hurt. After time passed, I didn’t think about it.”

“Well, the thing is Brice; I wasn’t hurt in the normal sense, though I did have some serious bruises as well as a surgery scar.”

“I don’t remember any bruises, or a scar. I remember you spending a lot of time in bed getting better though.”

“The bruises weren’t anywhere you could see easily. I had some on my wrists and some on my ankles, but mostly on my thighs, my inner thighs. I even had some on my neck. That’s why I wore a scarf anytime I left my room. The scar, well, it was hidden under my pants.”

Brice looked livid. Sofia could see recognition forming on his face. She could also see his anger, and his disgust. She turned her back to him. She didn’t want him to see the guilt she felt. She had ruined his time at the Grove that night, and now she was doing it again. Now he knew why.

“Who did it?”

“What?” she asked him.

“Who did it Sofia? Who raped you?”

She turned her head, “what does it matter. I’m dirty, ugly, and untouchable. But nobody can ever know about this Brice. Please?”

“Sofia, it’s not your fault. You don’t have to be ashamed. He is the one who hurt you and I want a name.”

“It is my fault. I led him on. I dressed too sexy and flirted with him. I shouldn’t have worn a two-piece swimsuit. I shouldn’t have let him walk with

me. I shouldn't have smiled at him. He got the wrong idea. I didn't mean to but still, I can't deny I'm partially to blame."

"Oh my God. Sofia, who told you that bullshit? It's never the girls fault. I don't care if she walks around naked. If she says no then you leave her alone." Brice pulled his sister into a hug. "Why did you have bruises on your ankles and wrists?"

"Because he had me tied to the bed. I fought the binds, but I couldn't get away."

"Tell me what happened Sof. Tell me everything."

Sofia sighed as she recalled the day she had tried so hard to forget. Only Brice could get her to retell the worst day of her life.

"I was swimming in the lake when I saw him on the bank. I never thought about the suit I had on and I walked up to him and started talking. I didn't mean to flirt with him; I was just trying to be nice and polite. I picked up my towel and he walked me to the main house. He said he would walk me to my room but I told him I was fine by myself. He insisted so I gave in. When we made it to my door, he opened it for me to go in. I walked past him to my bed. When I turned around, he was shutting the door from the inside.

"I asked him what he thought he was doing and he just smiled at me. I heard the lock as he turned it. He walked toward me and told me I was a vixen. He said I shouldn't flaunt myself so much or someone would get the wrong idea. I told him I was sorry. I hadn't meant to lead him on, but he said it was too late, I owed him for the things I had done. When I asked him what I had done, he said I teased him and now I had to pay up, that no one teased him without following through. I told him I hadn't teased him and tried to run for the door.

"He grabbed me and threw me on the bed. Then he chocked me until I passed out. When I woke up, I was tied to all four posts with my own stockings. He was looking down at me smiling. He said he'd been waiting for me to wake

up. He didn't want me to miss the best part of our night. I still had on my suit at this time and he sat down on the bed beside me. He reached under me, untied the top, and pulled it off. Then he untied the bottoms, all the while telling me how beautiful I was and how much I was going to enjoy our time together.

"When I started to cry he slapped me. He said harlots like me didn't deserve to cry. We should know our place. I tried to tell him I was not a harlot, I was still a virgin but he wouldn't listen. He said no proper girl would dress the way I did. Then he raped me. It hurt so bad I screamed but he put a handkerchief in my mouth so nobody would hear me. When he was done, I thought he would let me go. But he just walked over to the window and looked out. I asked him to let me go but he said no, that he liked to take his time with his conquests and we had all night. Then he raped me again, repeatedly, for hours.

"I don't know how long I had been there but I know it was late. He heard someone trying to get in the door and he panicked. He jumped out the window. I could hear someone asking if I was in there and if I was sick, but I couldn't answer. Finally, the door came open with a bang and Uncle Melvin's bodyguard tumbled in falling to the ground from having used his shoulder to open the door. The maid came over and covered me up and Aunt Esther called mom and dad. They came and took me to the hospital and took you home."

When Sofia looked at Brice, she couldn't read his face. She could see he had tears in his eyes but his expression was unreadable. She could see that he had his fists clenched and there were broken twigs lying under his hands. "Now are you glad I told you everything, or do you wish you never heard it?"

"You never said his name Sofia. What was his name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Brice looked her in the eye, "so I can kill him for what he did to you. You didn't deserve that sissy. You didn't do anything to lead him on. It's not your fault. Do you understand me? It's not your fault"

“Brice, I had almost nothing on. I let him in my room. In some way, I had to have told him I wanted him. Why else would he have done it?”

“Because he’s sick and doesn’t know right from wrong. Just believe me when I tell you, you are not to blame and I don’t feel any different about you. Now Sofia, give me his name.”

Sofia turned away from Brice’s stare. Quietly she said the name she hadn’t uttered since that horrible night, “Sean.”

“You mean our *cousin* Sean?” Brice asked feeling disgusted.

“Yes Bri, Cousin Sean.” She said a little too loudly, “Now do you see what I mean? We’ve known him since we were babies. If I hadn’t led him on, he would never hurt me. That’s why I didn’t tell you. You always loved riding with him and I didn’t want you to stop. I told mom you could still come back here but she said no. I’m sorry I ruined your summers.”

“You didn’t ruin anything. I loved the camp where they sent me. I loved going by myself. I felt grown up.” Brice hugged her tighter, “Sean ruined you. He’s the reason you never dated. He’s the reason you don’t trust anyone. I will make him pay for what he did.”

“I don’t see how Bri. Nobody has seen Sean since that night. He jumped out the window and didn’t come back.”

“If he’s gone then why haven’t we been here since, just to visit at least?” then Brice blushed, “I guess that’s insensitive of me. You couldn’t bring yourself to come back after that.”

“It’s not that Bryce, at least not just that. Uncle Melvin didn’t want me back. He said if I didn’t go around half-dressed, all the time then Sean wouldn’t have lost control. Dad told him that if I wasn’t welcome then no one would come back. That’s why we haven’t been here since then. When he died, Aunt Esther sent an invitation to all of us but dad didn’t want to make me face it with Sean still free. He was afraid he might come back now that his father was dead.”

“I know I was too young to know what was going on then, but why didn’t you ever tell me. I’m not dumb you know. I knew there was more to it than what I was told. You could have trusted me.”

“I’m sorry. I always thought you blamed me for not coming back here. I thought it was my fault. I felt guilty for so long that I just believed you would think me guilty too. Please forgive me for everything.”

“You don’t need forgiveness. I love you no matter what. Now just tell me about the hospital and police. I want to know why they never caught the guy.”

“After Frankie knocked the door open, Aunt Esther asked me who had been in there. When I told her, Uncle Melvin left the room. Frankie offered to go hunt him down but I said no. I didn’t want to see him again and I thought that they were going to bring him back to the house. When mom and dad got there, dad took you home and mom took me to the hospital. I was anemic from blood loss and in pain. They kept me there for five days. The cops came the next day to ask me questions. I told them the same thing I told you. The swimming and the door locking. They took a report but nothing ever came of it because nobody knew where he was.”

“Nobody ever found him? Did they even look?” Brice asked.

Sofia shrugged her shoulders, “I have accepted the fact he’ll never be punished for what he did. Just knowing you don’t blame me makes me feel free again. I still can’t wait to get out of this house and back home though.”

“I understand now sissy. I do have one question though. Why were you so scared in the dining room and stare at the kitchen door? You said he raped you in your room.”

“When he walked me to the house, he brought me in through the kitchen up the servant’s stairs so no one would know he was with me. The dining room is where Frankie carried me and Uncle Melvin called me a slut and said I seduced Sean. I guess that’s what was going through my mind.”

“Why didn’t Aunt Esther call an ambulance instead of waiting the three hours for mom and dad to get here? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Uncle Melvin wouldn’t let her call. He said it was my own fault for being such a slut and he wouldn’t sully the good name of his ranch with false allegations. Aunt Esther just had Frankie move me to the entry hall to wait for mom and dad. I could hear them arguing. I hadn’t thought about that in a long time. It was the only time I remember Aunt Esther raising her voice.”

“She didn’t argue enough. Well sissy, it’s getting late. We should get back unless you want to sleep out here tonight.”

“If we had sleeping bags I would do just that Bri. It almost feels peaceful here.”

Brice smiled and went to his saddlebags. He pulled out two thick blankets, “this good enough?”

Sofia couldn’t help but smile through her tears, “yes, that’s good enough.”

“One more question then we’ll change the subject, I promise. Are you ok? Physically I mean. You said blood loss, bruises, and a surgery scar I have never seen. I know there are STD’s and all sorts of stuff that can happen to a woman that is assaulted.”

Sofia put a finger on his lips, “its ok Bri. I know what you’re asking. No, I didn’t get pregnant or get any STD’s. I was bruised and battered, had loss of blood from being a virgin and raped repeatedly. The worse part about the whole thing is I’ll never have children. He damaged me too severely, hence the severe blood loss and an emergency hysterectomy.” Sofia pulled her shorts down just enough to see a faint line across her lower abdomen, “I have accepted it and you need to as well. I will be the worst aunt in the world, but I will never have a child of my own. Of course, you have to have sex for that and I never will so it’s not a total loss.”

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